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ALMOST PERSUADED
A TALE OF VILLAGE LIFE



“ALMOST PERSUADED.”



She rested her face upon her hand, and cried bitterly."—P. 37.

“ALMOST PERSUADED.”

A Tale of Village Life.

BY

A CLERGYMAN'S WIFE.

LONDON:

SEELEY, JACKSON, AND HALLIDAY,

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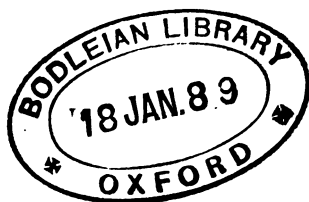
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“ALMOST PERSUADED.”


CHAPTER I.

It was a Sabbath afternoon. A party of young girls, whose ages varied from sixteen to twenty, were taking their way to the Rectory. Their various dress and appearance showed them to be of different ranks and degrees in society. Some were evidently farmers' daughters, while others were dressed in the simple manner belonging to the labouring classes. But, as they wound their way up the steep hill that led to the Rectory, all seemed alike engaged in some interesting topic of conversation, for they talked fast, and as they talked, the eager

expression of each face showed that the subject was one of much interest.

"Are not you going?" asked a tall gaily-dressed girl to another, who walked by her side with rather a discontented expression of face. "I know I would not stop away for anything you could offer me. I went with my brother William last year, and I never had better fun in my life. Talk of the Midsummer fair, indeed! It's not half so good as the races! I am sure if you went once you'd go ever afterwards. Why don't you go?"

"I should like to well enough," answered the other in a gloomy tone, "but father won't hear of it. I can't think what makes him so particular, for he is not one of the church-going people, like Mary Price's father, who never will do anything Parson Howard says they ought not to do; but, somehow or other, father is terribly set against races. He declares it's the cruellest thing in the world to see poor animals



goaded and tortured in the way race-horses are, and that he never could look one of the horses on our own farm in the face again if he had been amusing himself by witnessing their miseries. It's very vexing for us girls, who have to suffer for his fancies. I do so wish I could go, though Mary Price declares she would not go if her father and mother gave her leave."


At this several of the girls turned round, and stared rudely at Mary Price, who was walking along quietly with her Bible in her hand, and who, although she must have heard all that had passed, took no notice of it, until one of the girls appealed directly to her, saying,—

"Now, Mary, is that true? Can you say you would rather not go to the races on Tuesday, if your father would give you leave?"

Then Mary looked up quietly, and said, very humbly, but very decidedly, "Indeed, Jane, I can say so. You know we ask God

every morning and every night to lead us not into temptation, and surely we ought not to thrust ourselves into it without being led. Don't you think so, too?" she said, turning to a young girl at her side, who up to this time had been listening eagerly to all that was going on, but without herself taking any part in the conversation. She was remarkably pretty, and there was something peculiarly pleasing in her manner, and in the tones of her voice, which were sweet and winning, as she answered with an open ingenuous countenance,—

"Really I don't seem as if I knew my own mind about these races. I almost wish they were not going to take place at all, and then I should not be troubled to know whether or not I should go. It's often so with me. I seem made up of two people, one saying one thing, and the other saying just the opposite, and between the two I don't know what to do. When I hear Anne Morris and Julia Bright talking of



all the fun they expect to have, and see them so busy making preparations for going, then I feel as if I should like to go too; but then when I hear you, Mary, talking so gravely about the wickedness of the thing, and see how set against it Mr. and Mrs. Howard both are, I feel as if perhaps I had better stop quietly at home. How Mr. Howard did preach about it this morning! didn't he? Sometimes my thoughts are all abroad, and for the life of me I cannot attend to the sermon; but this morning, do you know, Mary, I could not help listening to every word. It seemed to me just as if I was the only person in the church, and Mr. Howard was saying it all to me. I suppose that was because I had been turning it over so often in my mind, and when I heard all Mr. Howard said I was 'almost persuaded' not to go. But when we came home, father said he had never heard such nonsense in all his life. To be sure," she added, in a lower

tone, "mother did say she never heard any one preach plainer truth."

"And so it was truth, Sarah," replied Mary Price; "we all thought so, too; and father said afterwards, that supposing he had thought of going to the races before, he never could have gone after he had heard such a sermon as that. It was so true what Mr. Howard said about its being possible we might get some harm there, but it was quite impossible we could get any good."


By this time the two girls, who during this conversation had lingered behind the rest, had reached the Rectory, and when they entered the kitchen they found that they had delayed so long on the way that the other girls were already assembled, and they were waiting for them to begin. Mrs. Howard sat at the upper end of a long table. A Bible was open before her, and she held a Prayer-book in her hand.

— the girls entered they were struck by

grave expression of her face. She greeted them kindly, and then gave out the first psalm :

"How blest is he who ne'er consents,
By ill advice to walk ;
Nor stands in sinners' ways, nor sits
Where men profanely talk."

The girls all sang. Sarah's voice was lower and more tremulous than usual. Mary's clear notes seemed clearer and fuller than ever. She sang with all her heart, and with an earnest expression of face which Sarah did not fail to remark. Anne Morris sang loudly too, not a note faltered, but Mrs. Howard observed with sorrow the utter want of feeling with which she sang the sacred words : her eyes were wandering here and there ; the expression of her face was almost satirical, and as they closed their books, and turned to kneel, she whispered to Julia Bright, who stood next to her, " We had that psalm for the races.



We are in for a second sermon about it now.”

Earnest and solemn were the tones of Mrs. Howard’s voice as she prayed that the “Lord of all goodness would in his mercy grant his people grace to withstand the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and with pure hearts and minds to follow the only true God.”*

“We will read the first chapter of Proverbs,” said Mrs. Howard, as they rose from their knees and took their places at the table, with their Bibles before them ; and it was read by all the girls, each reading a verse in turn. It came to Sarah to read the tenth verse, “My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not,” and as she read it she glanced at Anne Morris and Julia Bright, who were sitting together opposite to her, as though she felt that they were the sinners who were enticing her. The


* Collect for Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity.

chapter ended, Mrs. Howard explained it briefly, but very earnestly. Some of the girls listened attentively as she dwelt on the danger of entering into temptation, and then set before them the gracious invitations and warnings of Wisdom, and the awful judgments denounced against those who, when entreated to hearken unto her words, set at nought her counsel, and would none of her reproof. Mary Price sat with her eyes fixed on Mrs. Howard, and her whole soul seemed rapt in delighted attention. Her eyes never wandered save once, when she fixed them on Sarah with a look that seemed to say, “I hope you hear all this.” And Sarah did hear it all, and as she heard she felt convinced—convinced that it would be much better to give up all thought of the races, and remain quietly at home. The class was ended. Each girl wished Mrs. Howard a respectful good-bye, and when, as Sarah left the room, Mrs. Howard said to her, “I hope you are not

going to Westcombe on Tuesday?" she answered, "No, ma'am, I don't intend to go." Mrs. Howard felt thankful, for she knew that Sarah's father was a godless man, proud of his daughter's beauty, and anxious to seize every opportunity of displaying it; and although she knew that the mother was a pious woman, she feared lest her influence should be altogether insufficient to restrain Sarah from following the example of the greater number of her young village companions, and going with them on the following Tuesday to the Westcombe races. Mrs. Howard felt that a load was removed from her mind when she heard Sarah say she did not mean to go, for she knew that Sarah, though amiable and affectionate to a degree, was also vain and giddy, and she had trembled to think of all the evil that might result to her from being exposed to such a scene of sinfulness and folly as the races would be; she was truly thankful that Sarah was herself convinced

of this, and had decided on remaining at home. And Sarah was convinced, and she had decided. But it was the passing conviction of a moment — the decision of an unstable heart.

No sooner had the Rectory-door closed behind the girls than Anne Morris burst into a rude laugh and said, “Well, wasn’t I right? I told you we were going to have a second sermon on the same text, and so we just have! Parson Howard says sometimes he has got so much to say in his morning sermon, he must leave part for the evening; but he might as well have told us this morning he had handed over the rest of his sermon to Mrs. Howard. Perhaps there is a third part coming to night, but for my part I’ve had enough, and I shall not go to church. Come, Julia,” she added, “there is only to-morrow before the day, and we shall be busy enough getting things ready. We had better decide at once what we shall



wear. Sarah Palmer will be the best-dressed girl of us all, if we don't take care. I suppose, Sarah, you wear your lilac-silk? What a lucky girl you are to have a father who buys you silk dresses! Mother said she was in Astlett's shop when he was choosing it last market-day, and she never saw any woman take more trouble to choose her own dress than he took about yours. He even asked mother which colour would best suit a girl of your fair complexion. And when the shopman said, 'This one is much the cheapest,' he answered, 'Never mind about cheapness. I've only got one girl to dress, and she is good-looking enough to deserve being well set-off;—he had heard say a fine jewel was worth a good setting, and he would set off his properly, if it did cost him an extra pound or two.' I told father all about it the next day, but he only said if I wanted a silk dress I must wait till I had earned it; and that won't be in time to wear at the races,

so there's no use thinking about it. I suppose, Sarah, your father bought yours on purpose for you to wear on Tuesday?"

Mary Price looked at Sarah with interest, expecting to hear her say she had no thought of going to the races, but Sarah remained silent. Mary then tried to draw her away from the other girls, who went on talking about their dresses and all the amusement they expected to have at the Westcombe Races, but Sarah chose to walk by their side. She did not, however, join in the conversation, but walked on with a vexed expression of countenance until they came to the little lane which led to her father's house, and then turning suddenly to the girls, and wishing them all "good-bye," without even looking at Mary Price, she ran quickly down the lane, and was out of sight in a moment. She did not pause till she came close to the house, when a sudden thought seemed to strike her, and she leant against a stile, which led into one of the

meadows, and tried to collect her thoughts. "I'm sure," she said to herself, "I don't know what I am going to tell father to-night when he speaks to me about these races. I had better sit down here and make up my mind before I go into the house. Father wants me to go. He will be greatly vexed if I don't go, especially when, as Anne Morris says, he has bought that new dress on purpose. And I can't see what harm I can possibly get there when I shall be with father all the time. It's not as if I was going with Anne and Julia, and a party of young people, and no one to look after them; but I suppose father can keep me out of harm's way. It will be great fun too. There's nothing I like better than a dance, and they are going to have one in the evening at Miller's Stores. Father said it would be a very properly-conducted affair and he had promised Charles Winter I should dance the first dance with him. Father said he was about the only young

fellow good-looking enough to stand up with me—but that’s father’s nonsense, of course. But then, again, it seems wrong to go. Mother would give anything to keep me at home, I know, though she cannot say much, because it would be setting me against father; and Mr. and Mrs. Howard say races are such wicked places; and Mary Price wants me so much not to go, and I am sure Mary loves me, and only wishes it because she thinks it best for me. And she said, too, she did not want me to know more of young Winter, and if I go I am sure to get better acquainted with him, for father has promised him that I shall dance with him. Father likes him because he is so handsome and goodnatured, and has got so much money; but if Mary says I had better not know him, then I had better not: for Mary never says a word against any one unless she really is obliged to do it, and she never believes any harm of any one until she has taken pains to find out the whole.

truth. If I go I shall vex Mary and grieve mother, and Mr. and Mrs. Howard who have been so kind to me. And if I don't go, why there will only be father who will care at all, and that will only be just for a day or two; and if I really make him see I would rather not go, I don't think he will care at all: for he said he only went to take me, and that it was a great fatigue for an old man like him. So, altogether, I think I had better not go." And so saying Sarah Palmer left the stile, and ran on quickly to the house, where she found her father and mother waiting tea for her. She went to church with her mother that evening. She saw no more of the silly girls who had been with her in the afternoon. She listened to Mr. Howard's earnest warnings, and she felt quite glad she had decided not to go. On her way home she told her mother of her decision.

"I am thankful to hear it, Sarah dear," said her mother; "but don't trust to your

own strength to keep your resolution. You will be hard pressed to go to-morrow. Your father has asked young Winter to come in to supper, that he may make arrangements for you all to go together in old Mr. Winter's tax-cart, and you know he does not like his plans to be put out. So you had better be quite decided. And don't trust to your own strength, but ask God to enable you to do just what is right.”

Well would it have been if Sarah had paid attention to her mother's advice, and turned the good resolutions she had formed in her own strength into earnest prayers for grace from on high, that she might be enabled clearly to discern the path of duty, and with unfaltering steps to walk in it.

The Tuesday came. It was a bright summer's morning. The road to Westcombe was lined with gaily-dressed people, some on foot and some in light carts, all with cheerful faces, on their way to the races. Amongst


the rest was old Mr. Palmer, dressed in his Sunday suit, and on his arm was his fair young daughter in her gay lilac-silk, and with new white ribbons in her bonnet, looking, as her father had already told her several times, about as well as a country lass need wish to look. By her side walked a young man of about twenty years of age. He was very handsome, tall, and well made; but there was something displeasing about him—a self-satisfied air, and a conceited voice and manner, which ill became so young a man. As the little party walked through the lanes on their way to Ash Farm, where Mr. Winter's cart was waiting to convey them to the races, they passed Mary Price's cottage. Mary was at the gate, just returned from taking her little brother to school. At the sight of Sarah so gaily attired, and with young Winter at her side, Mary's usually bright face was clouded, and she turned sadly into the house. Sarah saw her, and

her affectionate heart was touched. She could not bear to leave her without a word, and letting go her father's arm, she ran into the cottage, saying,—

“Good-bye, Mary dear; pray don't look so grave. I'm not going to get into any harm.”

“Oh, Sarah!” was all Mary could say.

“Well, never mind,” replied Sarah, with a faint attempt at a laugh, “I can't stop now. Perhaps I had better have stayed with mother. I was ‘almost persuaded’ not to go.” And so saying she gave her friend a kiss, and ran on to rejoin her father, who greeted her by saying he could not imagine what she saw to like in such a down-hearted, low-spirited girl as that Mary Price.



CHAPTER II.

Mrs. HOWARD sat in the drawing-room at the Rectory, when a servant entered and said that a young woman from the village wished to speak to her. It was Sarah Palmer, who had come to say good-bye, as she was going to service. Mrs. Howard laid down her work as Sarah entered, and looking kindly at her said,—

"And so, Sarah, you have decided on leaving home?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Sarah. "I don't like to stay at home and do nothing, and father did not wish me to be a dress-maker, for fear it should injure my health, and there is not enough employment in our

house for mother herself, and so I am going to service.”

“And have you found a good place?”

Sarah hesitated a moment before she answered, for her conscience told her that if she acquainted Mrs. Howard with the exact truth her advice would run counter to her own wishes, but her natural ingenuousness prevailed, and she replied,—

“I have the choice of two, ma’am. The Squire’s lady wants a maid to attend entirely on herself, and has told mother she is willing to try if I will suit her; and there is a vacant place over at Hazlewood, ma’am. One of the lady’s maids is going to be married, and the young ladies told father—he works for Mr. Hazlewood, you know, ma’am—that if I liked to try the place, they would take me at once.”

“And your parents, Sarah, what do they wish?”

“Father wishes me to go to Hazlewood,

ma'am ; but mother would rather I went to the Hall."

"And you, Sarah, what do you wish yourself?"

Again Sarah hesitated a moment, and then, with a blush, she said,—

"I think, ma'am, I had rather go to Hazlewood."

Mrs. Howard was silent for a few moments. She did not like to advise Sarah to act contrary to her father's wishes, and yet when she reflected on all the harm that might result from her taking up her residence at Hazlewood House, she could not but set the truth plainly before her ; she had always been greatly interested in Sarah Palmer ; she had watched her for years, and had mourned to see in her an indecision and instability of heart which she feared, unless overcome, might lead her to ruin. It had shown itself strongly in the instance of the races, and now it was making

its appearance again in the choice of a service.

Mrs. Howard would have desired nothing more than to have seen Sarah become a member of the Squire's family, for he and his wife were both truly Christian people, who spent their ample means in doing good, and promoting the welfare, both temporal and spiritual, of all who came within their influence. Mr. Hazlewood's family were renowned for being the gayest people in the county, and their house was an incessant scene of dissipation and confusion. Mr. Hazlewood himself lived only to hunt, shoot, and dine. He scarcely ever spoke of anything but his dogs, his horses, and his wines. His wife was in delicate health, and rarely left her room, except to drive out in her carriage. There were two gay young men who spent their entire days in sporting, and their evenings in some place of amusement, and three young ladies, whose sole object in life was

to dress and go to balls. Mrs. Howard knew that in all the house there was not one who would care for Sarah's real interests, and she dreaded the thought of her being exposed to so much gaiety and temptation without a friend at hand to give her a word of counsel. Plainly and very earnestly, therefore, she set before her the danger of exposing herself unnecessarily to such a scene of temptation.

"You know, Sarah," she said, "we pray daily that we may not be led into temptation; how, then, can you ask or expect God's blessing if you heedlessly thrust yourself into it? It is true that God can preserve us from evil wherever we may be, and keep us from danger, even in the midst of the severest trial, but we dare not tempt his goodness. And here are two places open to you: the one offering you every temporal advantage you can possibly require, and, at the same time, many spiritual advantages; the other, likely to lead you into scenes of

folly and temptation, which, did you but consult only your best earthly interests, you had far better avoid."

Sarah listened respectfully, and when Mrs. Howard finished speaking she thanked her, and said she believed it would be better to decide on going to the Hall. But ere she had reached home, her feelings had undergone a change. She remembered that at Hazlewood she would have full liberty, even more than she enjoyed at home ; whereas, if she went to the Squire's, she would no longer be her own mistress. "I would rather trim caps and bonnets for those elegant young ladies," she thought, "than spend my days in cutting out clothes for all the dirty little children in the neighbourhood, or carrying gruel to a set of grumbling old women. Besides, if I go to Hazlewood, I can see Charles whenever I like ; and if I go to the Hall there will be an end of that : for his own cousin lived there once as lady's-maid, and they would

not let him go near the place, even to take a message to her.”

This decided the matter. The next morning Sarah Palmer took her way to the town. She passed Mary Price's house, and there was Mary busily engaged in weeding her neat little flower-garden.

“Good morning, Sarah,” she said; “what brings you out so early?”

“I am going to service, Mary,” was the answer; “at least, I am on my way to accept a place that has been offered me.”

“Indeed!” said Mary; “then I wish you joy, for I suppose you are going to the Hall: I knew the Squire's lady wanted a maid, and I thought it very likely she would think of you, as she knows your mother so well, and likes her so much. It's the most delightful place. Lucy Simmons has just left to be married, and she told me Mrs. Churchill had been so kind to her, she never could be grateful enough. She used to make Lucy read the Bible aloud

every morning, and then she would explain it to her. Lucy says she never knew before how beautiful the Bible was. Do you know, Sarah, when I heard the Squire's lady wanted a maid, I felt inclined to go and ask her to take me. I had never thought of going to service before ; but I am not wanted at home, now my poor sister has lost her husband and come back to live with us, and I felt that it would be such an advantage to live with such a lady as Mrs. Churchill. Oh, Sarah, what a fortunate girl you are !”

“I do wish, Mary, you would not talk so fast,” said Sarah, in a cross tone ; “you don't give one time to say a word, or I would have told you that I am not going to the Squire's at all. I know his lady wants a maid, and I should think you would be the very girl to suit her ; but I am going to be lady's-maid to the young ladies at Hazlewood.”

Mary's face was very grave, and she

would have begged Sarah to consider the matter further, but Sarah interrupted her by saying, “I really cannot stop to talk now, Mary, you always see things in such a grave light—not a bit like anyone else;” and she was turning away when she saw Mary’s grieved look, and said, “You’re a good girl, Mary; but I know all you were going to say. Mrs. Howard told me all that last night, and she ‘almost persuaded’ me, but now I have made up my mind, so good-bye;” and she ran on quickly without waiting for Mary’s answer.


The next day Sarah Palmer went to Hazlewood House to wait upon the gay young ladies, and a week later saw Mary Price established in her duties as lady’s-maid at the Hall.

CHAPTER III.

It was Sunday evening. The little congregation of Ashburton Church were listening to the words of their pastor, as he addressed them in earnest tones. In one of the pews belonging to the Hazlewood family sat Sarah Palmer, amongst a crowd of liveried footmen and smart ladies'-maids. Sarah herself was dressed as smartly as any of them.

She had grown quite into a young woman, and was very handsome, though her face had lost that expression of innocence which had formed its chief beauty in younger days. She was listening attentively to the words of the sermon, and as she listened she seemed uneasy and

disturbed, for she moved restlessly in the pew, and her eyes wandered frequently to a seat in the gallery, where sat a handsome young man, whose behaviour showed how completely indifferent he was to all that was passing around him. He did not even wear the semblance of attention; but sat, or rather lounged carelessly in his pew, occasionally passing his hand through his hair, or idly playing with his watch-chain. Sarah's eyes wandered frequently towards this young man, and then fixed themselves with a melancholy expression on a young woman who sat almost opposite to her. It was Mary Price, who was seated in the Squire's servants' pew. By her side was a young man of pleasing appearance, whose whole mind seemed occupied in listening to the sermon. When the service was concluded he and Mary left the church together, looking so happy and peaceful, that Sarah could not help remarking them with somewhat of a jealous feeling.




“They are happier than I am,” thought she; “I have felt so all the time that Mr. Howard has been preaching. No fear of James Bartlett not making a good husband. But Charles is so different! I wonder if it really is as Mr. Howard says, and there is no happiness to be found without religion? If so, I am afraid—” And Sarah sighed and seemed unwilling to leave the church, when she perceived that Charles Winter was standing in the porch making impatient signs to her. She joined him at the door and they walked on together, but Sarah seemed but little disposed for conversation, and for some minutes neither spoke. At length Charles exclaimed,—

“I say, Sarah, what is the matter with you to-day? You looked all church-time just as if you were under sentence of death, and after church I thought you must have gone to sleep, you were such a time before you moved from your seat. And no wonder either, if you had been asleep after such

length of sermon as the parson gave us. I thought he never meant to finish. And how James Bartlett and Mary Price did listen ! I amused myself by watching them. I suppose you know they are going to be married almost as soon as we are ? A fine couple they will be ! I don't believe there are two others like them in all the country round. Do you know, Sarah, how they spend their evenings ?—reading pious books, and, when they are particularly lively, singing psalms. We don't amuse ourselves exactly in the same way—do we ?" and Charles laughed aloud. But Sarah did not answer his question, nor did she join in his laugh. "What is the matter ?" he asked again ; "you are not a bit like yourself to-night."

"My head aches badly," she answered. "I have felt ill all day." And they walked on in silence a few minutes longer, until they came to the opening into the lane. Then Sarah stopped, and said hurriedly, "Charles, I cannot possibly go up to Ash



to drink tea at your place to-night, I feel so wretchedly ill. I am sure if I went, I never could get home again. No,” she added, as Charles turned into the lane to accompany her home, with many expressions of regret at her indisposition, and many invectives against the long sermon, which he declared was the cause of it: “No, Charles, don’t come down the lane with me. It’s out of your way to Ash, and we have been so long in church that you are late enough already, and your father does not like any one to keep tea waiting, especially when your sisters are there. You had better go on to Ash as fast as you can, and tell them I am very sorry I cannot come.”


And without staying to say good-bye, Sarah ran down the lane until she came to the stile; and then she stopped, and leaning against it, she rested her face upon her hands, and cried bitterly. It seemed to be the greatest relief to her. Feelings long

pent up appeared as though they had all given way at once ; and as she leant against the stile her whole frame shook with crying, and the tears forced their way through the hands which covered her face.

“ Oh, dear ! Oh, dear ! ” she said to herself, “ how wretched I feel ! And there is not a creature in the world I can speak to ! If mother only were alive, then I would tell her all about it ; but she is gone, and a happy thing for her, too : for Mr. Howard said she had gone to a world where there was no more care, and I begin to think there is plenty in this. There’s father. It’s no use speaking to him, for he thinks there is no one in the world like Charles. I believe he likes him very nearly as much as he does me, and he always takes his part even against me, when I do venture to set up a different opinion. The other night, after the bowling-match, when they had stayed so long at the Cups, and I was vexed about it, father only laughed at me, and

said it was all very well before Tuesday came, but it would not do afterwards, or Charles would be regretting the wedding-day. No, it's no use speaking to father. And then I can't speak to Mary Price. If she had not been engaged to James Bartlett, I might have asked her opinion, for Mary is a good girl, and she was always a friend to me; but I could not do it now. She would be telling Bartlett, perhaps. I know he hates Charles — some difference they had about the cricketing—he said Charles did not play fair; and I know he owes him a grudge, and would be very glad to do him a bad turn. Anyhow Mary would be thinking how foolish I had been in my choice, and how wise she had been in taking such a quiet young man as Bartlett, who never misses church, and would not set his foot in a public-house if he were paid for it. No, I can't speak to Mary, now. Only I wish I knew if Charles were steady. I dare say there is not a word of truth in the

reports that have been set against him. I know father has been told of them; for I heard him say to neighbour Jones that there never was such a gossiping set of people anywhere as there is in this village of ours; and that if people spoke against Charles Winter, it was just because they were jealous that they were not so rich nor so good-looking as he. Some people say he won't be as rich as father thinks. I know old Mr. Winter drinks; and they say his farm is in a very bad state, and that he owes more money than he knows how to pay: but I dare say this is not true either. And I am sure I don't care whether Charles is rich or not, if I were only sure about his being steady. But I cannot bear his going so often to the Cups, and keeping company with the Browns, who everybody says are such wild young lads. And when I say a word to him, he is so hasty with me, and speaks so sharply. I am sure if I were to be married, and he were to be rough to me



every time I happened to differ from him, I don't know what I should do ; I that have been so indulged all my life, and never had a harsh word from any one ever since I was born. And then Parson Howard said there was no happiness in those homes where there was no religion. And I believe there is some truth in that ; for all the time I have been at Mr. Hazlewood's, I have never seen any one what I call happy. There is laughing enough certainly, when the young ladies and gentlemen are up to any fun ; but I have never seen them what can be called happy. Unless they have got something to amuse them, they are almost always quarrelling. When the young gentlemen come home from their sport, they will quarrel about their horses, and their dogs, and who has ridden the best, and which has shot the most ; and the young ladies will dispute for hours about their partners, and their dresses, and there is no peace unless there is some gaiety or other going


on. While Mary Price says she has never been so happy in all her life as she is at the Hall, and I am sure they are religious enough. And whatever else Charles may be, steady or unsteady, he certainly is not religious; for he turns everything serious into ridicule, and I don't think he would go to church at all, if it were not to please me. I wonder whether he heard what Mr. Howard said to-day about godliness having the promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come; and about there being no peace to the wicked? Oh, dear! how I do dread being married next Tuesday, and how I wish I had some one to speak to!"

At this moment the idea of speaking to Mrs. Howard flashed across her mind. She went back in thought many years. She recalled the time when she formed one of the class of girls who used to assemble every Sunday afternoon in the Rectory kitchen. She remembered all Mrs. Howard's kindness to her, and how often she had striven

to lead her to walk in the right way. And then the recollection of one particular Sunday rose vividly before her mind. It was that Sunday before the races, when she had been so troubled in mind, not knowing whether to go or not. Something in the scene, perhaps, helped to recall the circumstances to her memory, for it was against that very stile she had leant on the day in question; and then, as now, her mind had been in a conflict of varied and diverse emotions.

Five years had passed since then. Many changes had taken place. The greatest of all was the loss of her mother, who had always striven to exercise her influence over her for good, and whose only sorrow on leaving this world was the thought that her husband was an unconverted man, and that her child must be left to his influence alone. Sarah herself was greatly changed. She was more thoughtful, more active; but in one thing it was the same Sarah still.

She was wavering and undecided, open to passing impressions and convictions, but unstable as water, and therefore unable to excel. On this evening the impression made had been deeper than any Sarah had received for years. Ever since the affair of the races, five years before, she had been growing more and more worldly, and throwing off, one by one, the restraints which religion and her mother's influence had laid upon her. Her life at Hazlewood had done more to injure her than anything else. There was not even the outward form of religion in that ungodly household, and Sarah had there learned, first to neglect her Bible, then to give up private prayer, and at length to live as did the rest of the family, to read their books, often novels of a light character, to laugh at their jests, and join in all their pursuits. The acquaintance she had made with Charles Winter at the races had strengthened into a friendship. The father had encouraged it until it became



an intimacy. On Sarah's going to live as lady's-maid at Hazlewood, he had applied for the situation of groom. They had become engaged, and were now on the point of being married. The wedding was to take place on the following Tuesday, and Sarah had that day left her situation at Hazlewood to spend the last two days with her father in the home of her childhood. That afternoon Mr. Howard had preached on the sacredness of marriage, its duties, and responsibilities. Doubtless, he had been told that two marriages were likely to take place during the ensuing week, and he wished to set before his young parishioners the solemn nature of the tie which they were about to form. Sarah's slumbering conscience had been awakened. As she listened, she felt that all Mr. Howard said was true. The prospect of her approaching union with Charles had often been dark to her lately ; for Charles had many ways and habits, of which she could not approve, and

now Sarah's mind seemed almost made up to leave him altogether. She thought she would go up to the Rectory, and open her heart to Mrs. Howard, and seek her sympathy, and ask her counsel: "for," she said to herself, "this uncertainty is dreadful, and I am 'almost persuaded' to break off my engagement even now."

At this moment a heavy hand was laid upon her shoulder, and her father exclaimed in a loud voice, "Why, Sarah girl! what's the matter? What, crying? Have you and Charles been quarrelling? Come, tell me all about it. Lovers' quarrels are soon set to rights. What have you disagreed about? And what has become of Charles?"

Sarah could not open her mind to her father. She dried her eyes, and left the stile, merely saying, "No, father, we have not been quarrelling at all, and Charles has only gone to Ash without me, because I had a headache and could not go with him, and

he could not stay with us to-night as his sisters are going there to tea."

"Well," replied her father, "you are not crying because you could not go with him or by way of mending your headache, are you? I should not think it at all a good way of getting rid of it. Come in and have some tea, and let us have no more nonsense. Why, of all the girls in the village to be found crying, I should have thought my Sarah was the most unlikely one, when it wants but two days to the gayest wedding Ashburton has seen for many a long day."

Sarah took her father's offered arm, and walked towards the house for some moments in silence. At length she said,—


"A gay wedding is all very well, father, but it's rather a serious thing to be married."

"So it is, Sarah," he said; "but it is not so serious for you as for most people. You are the only child your old father has got, and he can give you something. And

Charles has about as pretty prospects as a young man need wish to have. It is true old Winter is rather too fond of drinking, and does not look much after his affairs; but old people don't last for ever, and Charles is not very likely to follow his father's example; and while the old man lives, I don't think you are likely to do badly. What would you think of beginning housekeeping over at Ashby Park? It is only eight miles from this, and there is a capital place vacant there. I saw Mr. Hodges, the steward, at market yesterday, and he told me the keeper at the North Lodge had resigned his situation, and I made interest with him to get the Squire to give Charles the place. A comfortable berth you would have of it! Capital house,—excellent garden, stocked with everything you can want, and nothing to do but for Charles to open the gates when any one wants to come in. You may reckon on the place, for Mr. Hodges says Mr. Villars lets him do pretty

much as he pleases in these kind of things, and he has set his heart on you and Charles being there. He said he must have you, if it were only as an ornament to the place, you were such a handsome pair. There,” he added, “I need not have told you that to make you vainer than you are already, only I thought you wanted a bit of cheering up, for you seem cast down at having to leave your poor old father.”

Sarah did not tell her father that, much as she loved him, the thought of leaving him was not the cause of her grief. She went into the house with him, and had no more time that evening to think. Weary and ill, she threw herself into bed without a moment's thought, and when she woke the next morning the sun was shining into her room. It was eight o'clock, and all the house was astir making preparations for the morrow. The wedding-cakes were actually baking. The wedding-dress had been brought home, and was spread upon the



sofa in the little parlour,—the first sight that greeted Sarah when she came down. Her father was in high spirits, preparing cider and bringing up dusty bottles from his little cellar, and occasionally looking into the kitchen to tell the women he hoped they were doing things properly; for when a man had only one girl, and she was a good one, he would like to have all done in proper style. Neighbours were coming in continually with various little presents, for Sarah was a general favourite; besides, now that she was going to marry young Mr. Winter, her acquaintance would be worth keeping. There was a constant stir all day, and though Sarah felt low and nervous, the thought of drawing back now never entered her mind. She took her part in all that was going on, and only twice during the day did her feelings overcome her. Once when Mary Price came in to offer her friend her warmest wishes for her future happiness, and bring her wedding-present, a pretty

Prayer-book, enclosed in a neat velvet case of her own working, on which she had embroidered the initials “ S. W.,” and the date of the following day.

“ See, dear Sarah,” she said, “ I have put the mark in at the Marriage Service. It will enable you to find your place more easily to-morrow; besides, you will see there all my wishes for you expressed in better words than ever I could put them. I do indeed pray that the ‘ Lord may look upon you with his favour, and so fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace, that you and Charles may so live together in this life, that in the world to come you may have life everlasting.’ ”

“ God bless you, dearest !” she added, as Sarah made an attempt to thank her, which was utterly frustrated by the tears she could not restrain.

“ God bless you, Sarah ; you know we have always been as friendly as sisters, and

I hope we shall not be less so when we are both married than we are now.”

Again in the evening Sarah's strength of mind gave way. She was standing alone at the garden gate, taking a parting look at the old cottage which on the morrow would cease to be her home, when a servant from the Rectory came down the lane, and put into her hand a parcel directed to herself. It contained a large Bible. On the fly-leaf was inscribed her name, with the best wishes of her sincere friends Mr. and Mrs. Howard, and underneath was the text, “The Lord bless thee and keep thee. The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee. The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.”

Sarah carried the Bible into the house, and placed it with the Prayer-book that Mary had given her, on the top of her neatly-packed trunk. Somehow she could not take them into the kitchen, and show

them to Charles and her father. She looked at them with a melancholy expression before she closed the lid, and then she fell on her knees, and leaning her elbows on the cover of the box she hid her face in her hands, and again gave way to her tears. It was long since Sarah had prayed, but this evening she had felt a sinking of heart, and an earnest longing for help and strength superior to her own, which had almost led her to raise her heart in supplication to God; and now as she fell weeping on her knees, on this the last night she was to spend in the home of her childhood, the prayer her mother had taught her in her infancy rose to her lips, and in broken accents she prayed aloud that “God would watch over her, and take care of her, and forgive her all her sins for the sake of Jesus Christ her Saviour.”

Sarah rose with a strengthened heart. A change seemed to have come over her during those few minutes. She felt that

she had at least a Friend in heaven willing and able to protect her, for Jesus was the friend of sinners. Refreshed and comforted she returned to the kitchen. But as she entered Charles was humming to himself, with a careless air, the last stanza of a foolish song, and the words struck cold upon her heart.

The next morning was bright and cloudless. The church-bells rang a merry peal as Charles and Sarah Winter came forth arm-in-arm, and accompanied by a large party of friends, all gaily dressed in their holiday clothes, took their way to old John Palmer's cottage, where preparations had been made for the gayest wedding the village of Ashburton had seen for many a day.

CHAPTER IV.

THE evening was closing in. There was not light enough to see to work, but it was too early yet to light a candle, and Sarah Winter sat on a low chair by the fire in her comfortable room, with her sleeping child upon her lap. She did not like to move lest she should disturb him, and she had sat there so long that the twilight had given place to darkness, and there was no light in the room, save what issued from the red coals in the grate, when there was a gentle tap at the door; and, in answer to Sarah's "Come in," a young woman entered, and greeting Sarah kindly, said in rather a hurried, nervous manner,—

“ I am glad to find you alone.”

“ Oh, it’s you, Mary, is it ? ” said Sarah, recognising her friend’s voice. “ I have sat here so long with baby, that it has got quite dark. He fell asleep on my lap, and I did not like to move lest I should wake him. I’ll put him in the cradle and light a candle.”

“ Don’t strike a light for me, Sarah,” Mary answered ; “ I only want to speak to you, and one does not need a light for that. I am glad to find you alone,” she said again. Something in her manner seemed to vex Sarah, for she answered in an irritable tone,—

“ I dare say you are ; you were never friendly to Charles.”

“ Oh, Sarah ! ” exclaimed Mary, “ how can you say so ? You know I am always glad to see Charles, and I am only very sorry that you and he never will come up to our place. But I did want to see you alone to-night, for I have something very particular to say ; and it is about

Charles, too,” she added, yet more nervously. There was a pause of some moments, and then Mary said,—

“Sarah, dear, could you not persuade Charles to give up going out at night with the Browns and Dick Holston?”

“Going out at night with the Browns and Holston!” exclaimed Sarah, in a tone of surprise, which was evidently feigned, and utterly unlike her usual ingenuous manner. “Pray when did you see him out with them?”

“I have never seen him,” said Mary, “but others have.” Then, perceiving that Sarah was about to make an angry reply, she laid her hand on her arm, and said, “Don’t be angry, Sarah; I cannot remain long, and I must tell you what I have to say. I came here to-night out of love to you. I came to warn you, and advise you to warn Charles. James said I might; indeed he wished me to come, for he said he could not bear the thought of an old school-

fellow like Charles getting into trouble through his means; and yet, you know, he must do his duty to the Squire. The fact is, Sarah,—I cannot bear to vex you, indeed,—I never could have come here this evening if it had not been for my love for you. The fact is, James and the under-gamekeeper were out last night, and they met the Browns, and Holston, and your husband coming round by the preserves; and James plainly saw a hare in Holston's hand. James is going up to the steward to-morrow to give his report of his night's watching. The Browns and Holston are old hands at poaching, and he does not regret having to inform against them. He says it will be a kindness to half the county to get them out of the way; but he is quite downhearted about Charles: he knows he has only been led on to go out by the Browns, and he wants Charles to give him his word, that when Holston and they are gone he will give it all up. James would have

asked Charles himself, but he won't let him speak a word to him; he never has since that affair of the cricket-match, years ago; and so James asked me if I could not get his promise through you, Sarah. He said it would be a sad pity if you were to get into trouble with the Squire, and had to leave this nice house, where you have been so comfortable ever since you married. It would be a terrible thing for the children, too; they would never enjoy such advantages anywhere else as they do here, where they can go free to the Squire's school, and have such kind friends to look after them as Mr. and Mrs. Villars both are. And this you know, Sarah, is only looking at the thing in a worldly light. But you must remember what a sin it is to poach, especially in Charles, who is the Squire's own man, in whom he places confidence. If he cannot trust his own servants, who can he trust?"

Sarah heard all that Mary said without so

much as attempting to answer; and when at length Mary paused, and seemed waiting for a reply, she could not think of anything to say, and was feeling very awkward and uncomfortable, when the door was pushed open quickly, and a man's voice called out, “Hullo here! Where are you? Why there's no one here!—no fire—no candle!” At the sound of her husband's voice Sarah came forward and said, “I am here, Charles, and Mrs. Bartlett. We have been talking and almost let the fire out, but I'll make it up in a minute.” And as she spoke she lighted a candle and set it on the table, and then turned to look for the bellows to make up the fire.

Mrs. Bartlett rose to go, and Sarah did not ask her to remain. Winter took no notice of her at all, save by a clouded brow, which he wore the moment her name was mentioned. As she passed by him to leave the house, she wished him a civil “good evening,” but he did not return her salu-

tation; and no sooner was the door closed than he said in an irritable tone, “Pray what did that woman want here?”

While Mary Bartlett had been talking, Sarah had felt convinced of the truth of every word she uttered, and in her heart she was “almost persuaded” to do all she could to induce Charles to give up his bad companions and their evil ways; but all her resolutions vanished at the sight of her husband’s clouded face, and the sound of his angry tones; and when he again repeated his question, “What brought that woman meddling here?” she stammered out that “Mary was an old friend, and when her husband was out it was natural she should not always care to remain alone, but liked to come in now and then, and help her mind the children.”

“O!” said Charles, ironically: “a bit more of her Christian charity, which she uses as a cloak for her curiosity! As she has not got any babies of her own, she will come

and help you to mind yours!—a nice way of prying into other people's affairs, and meddling with what does not belong to her."

"I tell you what, Sarah," he added, as he saw his wife was about to take Mary's part; "I tell you once for all, I won't have Mary Bartlett coming here—I hate the sight of her, and the sound of her name. It was as much as I could do not to tell her so to-night. If she had not been a woman I would have given her a slice of my mind. A meddling, prying, canting pair they both are! As if we had not had enough of them at Ashburton, they must needs follow us to Ashby. As for the husband, he and I can't stop long so near each other, that's one certain thing. They say Squire Villars has got the largest park in all the country round; any how, big as it is, it's not big enough to hold me and Bartlett at the same time; and if he's going to stop here, poking about the place by day and by night, why I go, that's all! The impudent fellow! I

declare I met him last night, and he looked at me as though he were too holy to breathe the same air. I wonder I did not pitch him over the hedge into the ditch. He has owed me a grudge for years, and now they have made him gamekeeper, he thinks it is a fine opportunity of paying it off; and so it would be, only I will outwit him yet.”

Here Sarah made another attempt to speak, and succeeded so far as to say that “she knew Bartlett did not owe her husband any grudge; indeed, she had reason to believe he wished to be his friend.”

“And pray what do you know about it?” said Charles angrily. “Women have no business to meddle in their husbands’ affairs. I hope that canting woman has not been prying into mine; she had better not,” he added, with an oath.

Sarah made no further attempt to speak. She returned to her work of making up the fire, and then prepared her husband’s supper, which he ate moodily,

saying a single word. He then took his pipe and sat down in the chimney-corner. Sarah washed up the things, put everything tidy, took the stocking she was knitting for her boy, and sat down also. Neither she nor Charles spoke. Once or twice Sarah looked at her husband, as he sat puffing away at his pipe in his large chair, with a darkened expression of face, and she sighed deeply. People often envied Sarah Winter. She had every comfort that her rank in life could require. Her husband held a good situation, and had high wages. Her house was well furnished and comfortable. Her children were healthy and intelligent, always tidy in their appearance, and regular in their attendance at school. She had kind friends, many blessings, and many advantages. Yet, as she sat this evening knitting in her kitchen, she felt utterly wretched ; and as she meditated on her unhappiness and its cause, she was suddenly transported in thought many years back, and she fancied

herself seated in Ashburton Church, listening to the earnest tones of her former pastor's voice, as he solemnly assured his people that there was no happiness to be found in those homes where there was no religion.

At length the clock struck ten. Sarah saw that Charles was dozing in his chair, and she knew it would be useless to attempt to rouse him. She took the baby from its cradle and went up-stairs to bed. About an hour later she heard voices outside the house, and a stir in the kitchen below. She started up and ran to the window, in time to see her husband come out of the house with a lantern in his hand, and go through the park-gate in company with three other men. Then Sarah felt more wretched than before, and turning from the window with a weight of loneliness upon her heart, she threw herself upon her bed, and pressing her baby to her breast sobbed herself to sleep.

CHAPTER V.

It was evening time again, and Sarah Winter sat alone by the fire with a little child upon her lap, — but not, as before, in a pleasant room, surrounded with comforts. The room was small and badly furnished, and presented an appearance of utter discomfort. No attempt seemed to have been made towards rendering it as cheerful as the circumstances would allow. It was twilight, but the declining rays of the sun would have shone into the room, and cheered its dulness, if they could have pierced their way through the thick coating of dust which neglect had allowed to accumulate upon the window. The room was *miserably* cold, but the grate was full of

half-burnt coal, which had been allowed to die away for want of being attended to. Everything told a tale of desolation and neglect. The tea-things stood unwashed upon the table. The children's clothes lay about the room. No one who had seen the place would have believed that its owner and occupant was Sarah Winter, — Sarah, who had been for so long the mistress of the North Lodge, renowned for the neatness of her cottage, and the care she bestowed upon her family. Yet so it was. And Sarah Winter sat now in her disconsolate home, as changed herself as were all the circumstances that surrounded her. Few could have recognised in the melancholy-looking woman that sat by the dying embers in the grate any traces of the lovely girl who had once been the pride of the village of Ashburton. Her tall, slight figure, was bowed, apparently more with care than age. The fresh bloom of her complexion had given place to a sallow hue.

The once bright blue eyes had lost their former brilliancy, and were sunk in her head, and the expression of her countenance, which used to be so gay and trustful, had changed into a careworn, mournful look, which in itself was sufficient to alter the whole character of her face. It was but five years since Sarah had left her former home at Ashby Park, but those five years had done the work of fifty in the change they had effected in her character and circumstances.

Charles Winter had continued his intimacy with his bad companions, and persisted in his evil courses. Sarah had delayed exercising her influence over him until it was too late to be of any use. He had refused to take advice from her, or from any one else, and had gone on from bad to worse, until, convicted of poaching, he had been dismissed from his situation at the North Lodge. His father had become a confirmed drunkard. Everything at Ash

had been allowed to fall into neglect and disorder. Debts had accumulated, and there had been no means of paying them, until the farm had become of no value to any one. When old Mr. Winter died, it was sold to pay his debts, and then the creditors were not satisfied. Nothing remained for the children, and Charles was in despair, for he had himself contracted several small bills, which he had promised to pay when he should come into possession of his little property. Old Mr. Palmer's little cottage and garden were now all the young people had to look forward to. He had borne the news of Charles's ill conduct with great forbearance; perhaps the remembrance of the part he had himself taken in bringing about the marriage prevented his complaining of its unhappy result. He heard of Charles's dismissal from Ashby Park, and of the disappointment he had had in the distressing state of his father's affairs, without complaining, and even

offered to receive Charles and Sarah and the children into his house. Sarah entreated her husband to accept her father's offer and return to Ashburton, but he would not listen to her entreaties. He declared he was not going to leave Ashby for James Bartlett to triumph over him, and boast that he had got him turned out of the place altogether, and he persisted in taking a cottage in the village in spite of all Sarah's pleadings and persuasions. She suspected that the true reason of his determination to remain at Ashby was his unwillingness to break off his acquaintance with the bad set of men who were now his chosen companions. Holston and the Browns had gone, but Charles had many other friends of the same description, with whom he spent the greater part both of his days and nights, carrying on secretly, as Sarah had good reason to know, the illegal practices, the punishment of which, should he be discovered, would be so much more

severe than it had been for the first offence. He had said, when he hired the cottage, that he could get plenty of employment as a labourer, and they should do well enough until old Palmer died, and then the tide would turn in their favour, and they should sail along smoothly enough. But poor Sarah found it difficult to make any way at all against the stream of her present circumstances. Charles had been idle from his youth, and now he either could not or would not work. He was irregular in his hours, careless in the performance of business, insolent and overbearing when reproved, until at length scarcely a farmer in the neighbourhood would employ him, and he earned little money, but such as he gained by some illicit means. It was but seldom, even when he had money, that he brought any home; and Sarah had often trouble to maintain her children properly. She did what she could, principally by needle-work, for Sarah had been brought

up in self-indulgence, and was little accustomed to hard work; but she had learned to use her needle nicely when she was lady's-maid at Hazlewood, and now she often earned a little money by making frocks for her neighbours' children, or trimming caps and bonnets. But it was not much she could gain in this way, and she was often in want of money. On the evening in question, she had almost exhausted her little stock of money, and was wondering what she should do for the ensuing week if Charles did not return and bring her some help. He had been absent several days, and Sarah was wretched and weary with waiting for him to return. This evening she felt not only miserable, but ill also; and after she had put the elder children to bed, she sank into a chair by the fire, with her baby on her lap, and thought over her miseries. She remembered her happy childhood, — her mother's kindness, — her father's indulgence, — the promises

Charles had made to her when he persuaded her to leave all the happiness she had enjoyed at home for his sake,—and then she dwelt on the bitter disappointment she had had,—on Charles's ill-conduct at Ashby Park, on his disgraceful dismissal from his situation, on his neglect of her and the children ever since, until her mind settled on him as the cause of all her present trouble, and she was bitterly reproaching him in her heart, when the door, which she had neglected to fasten, was burst open, and her husband himself entered.

One look at him might have shown Sarah that it was no time then to put into words the angry reproaches which had been the subject of her thoughts. He was flushed and excited, and had a scowl upon his brow, as, without further greeting, he asked her in an angry voice, "If there was not a bit of supper ready for a man in his own house?" Sarah did not rise from her chair, or lay the baby in the cradle, nor did

she even look at her husband, as she answered, that "If a man expected to find his supper ready, he might as well say what time he would be coming home to eat it, instead of going away for days, and leaving his wife and children to do as best they could."

We have no wish to dwell on the scene that followed. Charles gave way to his unrestrained anger, and Sarah, in return, accused him of being the cause of all her disgrace and misery, and loaded him with reproaches, until at length he muttered something about "any place being better than such a home as his," and left the house, slamming the door after him.

Then Sarah started up. She scarcely knew why, but a feeling of dread came over her, and she longed to call to him to return. But pride and passion withheld her. She laid her baby down, and went quickly to the window. It was moonlight, and she saw, to her relief, that Charles

had not gone further than the gate, but stood leaning against it, apparently lost in thought. Doubtless the cool air was pleasant to his heated brow, for he leant there quietly, and seemed in no hurry to move. A conflict arose in Sarah's mind as she stood and watched him. She leant against the window, and conflicting thoughts passed rapidly through her agitated mind. "It was very wrong of Charles to remain away so long, but had she received him in a right spirit when at length he did return home? It was true Charles had been a bad husband, but had she been a good wife?" At this thought many painful remembrances of the times without number when she had greeted him with ill-temper and upbraiding on his return home rose before her mind, and she unwillingly reflected that, perhaps, if she had been different, Charles might have been different also. It was long since Sarah had opened her Bible, but she had not forgotten many of the verses she had learned in her

childhood, and often had they presented themselves as unwelcome guests to her mind. At this moment she remembered that saying of the wise man, “A soft answer turneth away wrath,” and she recollected how seldom the wrath of her husband’s impetuous spirit had ever been diverted by a soft word from her. And then she remembered having read somewhere of unbelieving husbands being sometimes won without the word by the conversation of their wives, and Sarah thought with grief how little there had ever been in her conversation likely to win her husband to better things. Times upon times, when she had returned evil with evil—anger with anger—upbraiding with upbraiding, rose before her mind, and she wondered what effect it might have had upon Charles if, from the commencement of their misfortunes, she had pursued a different line of conduct.

“It is true,” she said to herself, “Charles always does come home in a bad temper,

but I cannot say I ever do anything to make it better. It is not often, certainly, that he brings me any money ; but perhaps I don't go the best way to work to get him to think more of me and the children. When he brings me nothing I make a great fuss, and accuse him of being a bad husband and a cruel father ; but when he does bring a little I never so much as seem pleased, but take it as a matter of course, or perhaps I grumble that it is not more, or that it does not come oftener. I dare say that is not very encouraging. Maybe if I were to smile and seem pleased, and say now he had begun to work I felt sure he would go on, and what a good thing that would be for me and the children, he would be more inclined to try and do better. I don't know whether it is a good thing to be always and for ever reproaching and finding fault. Some characters, I've heard say, are more easily led than driven. People say James Bartlett, though he is such a good

man, has got a shocking temper by nature, and yet I don't believe he and Mary ever had a word of difference in their lives. But then Mary was always a meek sort of girl, without a word to say for herself, and I was born with a spirit of my own, though it never came out when I was at home, because of my being the only one, and always so indulged. Besides, things have gone smoothly with Mary, and she has had no end of good fortune ever since she married, while I have had nothing but trouble and grief—one vexation after another, until now I declare there does not seem anything in life worth living for. People little know what is before them when they set out. I that was to have had such a happy home at Ashby, and now it has all turned to misery, and all because of Charles. It began with his intimacy with those bad men. I am sure I had no hand in that, for I always hated the very sight of them, and when they came home I used to tell

Charles my mind about them. Perhaps, though, I did not go wisely to work to check the intimacy: for Charles is just one of those who can't bear to be thwarted. I have heard him say, that if any one wanted him to do a thing, the best way to set to work would be to ring for ever in his ears that he had better not do it. And then Charles is so fond of laughing and fun—he was always one for amusement, and I have often heard him say it drove him nearly wild to see any one look mopy. And I know I have often sat fretting at home, and deploring his bad ways, until when he came back he would find me with red eyes and so low-spirited I could not speak; or perhaps I would go to bed, and then he would be sure to go out again, up to the Browns' cottage or down to the Ashby Arms.”

It takes longer to repeat these thoughts than it took for them to pass through Sarah's mind, and as they did so she felt self-accused. Charles's failings seemed to

lessen in magnitude as her own increased ; and as she watched her husband standing leaning moodily against the gate, the remembrance of the better qualities which had once shown themselves in his character—of his generosity, and good nature, and affectionate disposition, rose to her mind also. She thought that her conduct might, perhaps, have checked the growth of these better feelings—checked them without checking the bad qualities which had gone on strengthening, and increased, notwithstanding her misguided attempts at restraining them; and as she thought she felt “almost persuaded” to call Charles back, and ask him to begin with her a new life—a life of toil and trouble she knew it must be ; but she did not see why, for all that, it might not be a life of greater happiness than any they had known yet. They were both young. They could both work. If *they* could overcome pride and idleness, *they* were not without friends still. She

was convinced it would be best to try, at all events to try. Nothing could be more utterly wretched than their present life. It could not be worse. It might be better. Sarah hesitated, and as she did so Charles pushed open the little gate, and before she could open the window to call him back he had turned into the lane, and taken his way to the public-house.

The next morning the news reached her that her husband had enlisted for a soldier the night before, and gone off with the recruiting party which had been for some time in the village.

Then Sarah's cup was filled to the brim. She truly loved Charles, and her heart sank within her at the thought of his having left her in such a way, without a parting word to her or the children. She knew something of the daring recklessness of her husband's character, and she dreaded lest he should never return, or even write to tell her *what had become of him.*

Mary Bartlett came to her friend as soon as she heard what had happened, and when she saw the state of distress Sarah was in, she expressed her wish to remain with her for a few days—at all events until they could learn some further news of Charles.

The two following days were spent in such grief as, notwithstanding Sarah's many troubles, she had never yet known. The third brought some comfort in a letter from Charles himself. The postman placed the letter in Sarah's hands, but she was too agitated to open it, and begged Mary to read it for her, and Mary read :—

"DEAR SARAH,—

"I write these lines to let you know that I am well, and that I hope you have not fretted at hearing I had gone. I never should have left you, only I had been drinking at the Ashby Arms, and did not rightly know what I was doing. I can buy a discharge any day for twenty pounds, but that

is a large sum. I thought of asking your father to lend it to me, and returning at once ; but I think it's better to let things be as they are for a little while. I had got into bad ways and amongst bad companions, and perhaps it is as well I should have gone away from them. Your father will be happy to take you and the children till I come back, and you will be better off there than you have been with me. I know I have not been so good a husband nor so good a father as I ought ; but things have gone against me, and when one gets into a wrong way, it is not so easy to get back into the right one. But I hope soon to come to Ashburton, and that we may get on better there than we have done at Ashby. I don't ever wish to see that place again. You can sell all the things, and that will more than do to pay the rent. You will find many to be kind to you now I am gone. As for Bartlett, I don't mind your being friendly again with him and his wife, if they wish it,

though he was the cause of my first getting into trouble. I must say he gave me fair warning, and he only did his duty, though I have owed him a grudge ever since. Don't let the children forget me while I am away. I have had many thoughts of doing better lately : for I have been sick enough of my life and of all those that I have had to do with, and now I hope I have done with it for ever. I will write again when I know where they mean me to go. Keep up your spirits, and you may depend on me for all the help I can send you until I can get back again.

"Ever yours till death,

"CHARLES WINTER."

Charles wrote a good hand, and Mary read his letter fluently. Sarah listened with breathless attention, and as she did so, her self-accusations increased most painfully. When Mary finished reading, she burst into tears, exclaiming,—

"Oh Mary, it's all my fault! He says he was sick of his life, and wanted to do better! If I had only encouraged him, it would never have come to this! I dare say that night he came home, if I had received him kindly, he would never have gone wrong again. Oh dear! oh dear! it's all my fault. And what shall I do if anything should happen to him before he comes back!"

"No, Sarah," Mary gently answered, "it is not all your fault, and you must not make yourself miserable by imagining anything of the kind. You cannot tell whether Charles would ever have been able to give up his bad ways and his bad companions, so long as he had remained in the way of temptation. In his own strength we know he never could. And perhaps this is the very best thing that could have happened to him, and you may yet thank God for it. This breaks up your present life altogether. We must hope when you and Charles begin

again, it will be under happier circumstances than you have yet known. The past we cannot recall. But I have read somewhere that often flowers grow out of the grave of the past to adorn the present and the future, and so it will be with you, Sarah, if all the lessons of experience which the past has taught you remain in your mind and lead you to live a different life. You know how often Mr. Howard used to tell us that there was no happiness to be found in those homes where there was no religion. I hope now you and Charles may seek in earnest for that godliness which has the promise of the life that now is, as well as of that which is to come. It is the pearl of great price. With it we are rich, whatever else we may want. Without it we are poor, whatever else we may have."

Sarah listened to all Mary said, and the words sank deep into her heart.

Nothing now remained for her but to return to her father. The old man ex-

pressed his entire willingness to receive her and her three children, and she was to go to him as soon as her little affairs could be set to rights. James and Mary Bartlett were unfailing in their kindness. They took her and the children to their cottage to stay with them, while her own was being arranged for the sale of her goods. James Bartlett relieved her from all the unpleasant part of the business. He did everything for her, and managed so well, that after the rent was paid there was a surplus, which sufficed to pay the baker and two or three debts of Charles's contracting, and Sarah had the satisfaction of being able to tell her husband that everything was paid. She wrote him a touching letter, frankly confessing how little she had ever done towards winning him back from any wrong ways into which others had led him, and earnestly hoping that he would soon return to begin with her a new and better life.

When all her affairs were settled, James

Bartlett borrowed a tax-cart from one of the farmers, and himself drove Sarah and her children back to the home which she had left ten years before under such different circumstances.

As they drove past the church and the quiet rectory where Sarah had received so much instruction, which might have been of such use and blessing to her if she had only taken heed to it, she buried her face in her hands; nor did she look up again until they stopped at the gate which led to her father's house, and, overcome with emotion, she got down from the cart and went to meet her father, who, leaning on his knob-stick, came down the garden to welcome his daughter and her children.

CHAPTER VI.

TWELVE months had passed away, and a fresh trial had befallen Sarah Winter in the death of her kind old father. It was the day of the funeral. Sarah had seen the friends who had come to assist in the mournful ceremony all take their departure homewards. The children were in bed, and she was sitting alone in the darkened room, when there was a knock at the door. She went to open it and Mrs. Howard entered, and taking the offered seat, made Sarah sit down beside her, and said kindly,—

"The evening service is just over, and I thought before I went in I would come and see you how you were. I heard that

the woman who has been helping you had gone home, and I fancied you might not like to remain alone in the house, and if so, one of my servants shall come and sleep here.”

“Thank you kindly, ma’am,” replied Sarah; “it’s just like your kindness to have so much thought for me, but I don’t at all mind remaining alone in the house with the children. Besides,” she added, “I should have to get accustomed to it, for I am likely to spend some time alone here yet.”

“You think, then, of remaining here? I had imagined you would not have been able to keep up the garden and manage such a house as this is with all you have to do with the children, and going out so frequently to work.”

“No, ma’am; nor could I alone, but I am happy to say my husband is likely to return, and then I hope he will work in the garden and go out to help the farmers, and

between us both, we may yet be able to remain in the place and be happier than we have ever yet been. I should like, ma'am, since you are so kind, to show you my husband's last letter. It came the day my dear father died, just after Mr. Howard left him. He was still quite sensible, and it was the greatest comfort to him to hear me read it, and to feel that I and the children would be well cared for when he was gone.”

And Sarah drew the letter from her pocket and gave it to her kind friend to read. Mrs. Howard read it with interest, and said, as she returned it to Sarah,—

“It is indeed delightful to see your husband writing in this way, and I trust it may not be long before he returns to carry all his good resolutions into effect. I feel very hopeful, for he writes most humbly, and seems to place no confidence in any strength of his own. I am only sorry he should give so bad an account of his health.”

“Charles was never strong,” Sarah answered; “he had several bad attacks of ague when we were Ashby, and he says being out at night, and getting but poorly lodged, has been very bad for him; but I hope he will soon recover when once he is at home. It is indeed a mercy he should be coming back, and so changed. Oh, ma’am,” and Sarah’s eyes filled with tears, “God has been very good to me. It is a great deal more than I deserve.”

“God is indeed good to us all, Sarah,” replied Mrs. Howard, “and we none of us deserve the least of his mercies. He deals with us as a wise and tender father would deal with his children, or a kind and faithful shepherd with his sheep. He does not leave us to wander into the depth of misery into which our own folly would lead us, but he comes to seek for us and bring us back in safety, though sometimes it is through *a way which we know not, and sometimes we oblige him by our waywardness to use*

his rod more roughly than he otherwise would.”

“Indeed, ma’am, that is true,” replied Sarah. “I am sure I was placed in pleasant paths enough, and might have walked on in them to this day, if it had not been for my own sinfulness and folly. And it has been very good of God to bring me back from the wrong ways into which I had wandered. He has punished me very severely, but it has all been in mercy.”

“We often learn to look upon our sorrows as our greatest blessings. The trial seems grievous at the time, but if afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness, we have indeed reason to thank God for it. People might think you had altered sadly since you married away from this place eleven years ago, but do you know, Sarah, what I thought this afternoon when I saw you returning from your father’s funeral? I recollected having seen you *come down that same walk in the church-*

yard eleven years ago, dressed in your wedding attire, and accompanied by a party of gay friends, and yet as I watched you go past to-day in your mourning dress and looking so sad, I said to myself, ‘Sarah is a happier woman now than she was then.’ For now I trust you have that true happiness which this world can neither give nor take away, and I am sure you would not part with it for all that earth could give.”

“Indeed I would not, ma’am,” was Sarah’s emphatic reply, as Mrs. Howard rose to leave; “and when I think how much of this happiness I owe, under God, to you and Mr. Howard, I feel how unable are any words of mine to express my gratitude.”

CHAPTER VII.

BUT a deeper sorrow still awaited Sarah Winter. Mrs. Howard had feared that it was nigh at hand, but its approach was unperceived by Sarah herself. A week before her husband's expected return the postman brought a letter in a strange hand. Sarah's heart misgave her as she broke the seal, and before she had read the first three lines her worst fears were realised.

Charles Winter had been seized with a rheumatic fever, and after a few days' suffering had died in the Military Hospital.

It was long before Sarah recovered from the illness which followed the shock of her husband's death. Her constitution had been greatly tried during the last few years

and ever since her husband left her she had been in delicate health ; but she had always buoyed herself up with the hope of Charles's return, and the anticipation of the new and happy life they were to spend together. With the crushing of this hope her strength gave way completely. A severe illness ensued, and for some weeks her life was in danger.

Mr. and Mrs. Howard's kindness was unvaried, and Mary Bartlett, when she heard of her friend's sad trial, and the dangerous illness into which it had thrown her, left her own home to go and nurse her, and look after the children.

When at length it pleased God to restore her, not a murmur escaped her lips. "God," she said, "has dealt with me according to his wisdom, and in judgment he has yet remembered mercy. How different it would have been if Charles had been taken before he too had seen the error of his ways, and sought for repentance and for pardon ! We


shall not meet, as I had hoped, in this earthly home, but I do trust we may one day meet in a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

That evening, as Mary Bartlett and her friend sat together for the first time since her illness in the little porch that led into the garden, Sarah said, “Mary, there is one thing I have thought a great deal of, though I have been too weak to speak of it till now. Of course I must leave this dear old place. It would be impossible for me to think of remaining here, so shattered as I am, and scarcely able to do anything. I should be tempted to wonder how I am going to maintain my three children in my present condition, if I did not feel sure that the God of the fatherless and the widow will provide for those who trust in him. This house must be sold, and that will bring something. I could not summon courage to speak to Mr. Howard about it, but will you do so for me when next he comes?”

"I will, if you wish it," answered Mary, "but I do not see why you may not yet remain in your old home; indeed I think you had much better do so. I have heard your father say the cottage has been in your family for nearly two hundred years. It has passed down from father to son for generations, and it was the old man's greatest wish that your Johnnie should have it one day. Now Bartlett and I have a plan, which we have only been waiting to propose to you until you should be strong enough to hear it. James is about to resign his situation at Ashby. He suffers from rheumatism, and cannot stand going out at night. It is my great wish to return to Ashburton. You know I was brought up here too, and I love the place, and the church, and the people, better than any others; besides, I could not bear to leave you and the children again after being so much with you. I used sometimes to think that children were the only blessing God

had withheld from me, but now I think I can see the reason of this. Perhaps I should not love yours as dearly as I do if I had a family of my own. Will you take me and James as lodgers in the house until such time as Johnnie shall be old enough to manage the place for himself, should it please God we should all live to see that day? James and I would take half the house and all the garden off your hands, and with the rent you would receive from us you might live comfortably in the other half. Johnnie shall learn gardening under my husband, and, I hope, will grow up to be a blessing and support to you and his sisters.”

Sarah could see no objection to so kind and prudent a proposal. She accepted it with many expressions of gratitude, and a month afterwards James and Mary Bartlett came from Ashby to live with her in the home of her childhood.



CHAPTER VIII.

“MOTHER,” said little Annie Winter to her widowed mother, as she held her hand on her way home from church, “what makes you always look so grave? I know you cry sometimes because father is dead, but it is such a long time now since he died, and I am sure we are all very happy. Schoolmistress often tells us we don’t know what it is to be fatherless children, for we have as good as three parents with you, and Mr. and Mrs. Bartlett. Johnnie says he never could have any one kinder to him than Mr. Bartlett is; he never goes to market for him in the little cart but he thinks all along the road how delightful it is to have such a kind friend, and how

much he hopes he shall sell all the fruit and vegetables, that Mr. Bartlett may smile at him when he comes home, and call him a clever lad. And only that nobody can be just like one's own mother, Lucy and I often say Mrs. Bartlett is very nearly as kind to us as you are. And they love you so much, and Mr. and Mrs. Howard love you, and every body loves you. Neighbour Jones said no one could help loving you, because you were so good and kind. I can't think why you should look so grave, or cry as you did at church to-day.”

The widow did not answer her child, but when they had entered the house she took down from the shelf the large Bible, which had been given to her on her marriage by Mr. and Mrs. Howard, and placing it on the table, she wrote her daughter's name in it, and underneath the text—

“Ye shall observe to do therefore as the Lord your God hath commanded you. Ye

shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left.”

And then she said, “When I am dead, Annie, this book will be yours. Follow the words of this text, and you will never shed the tears that I have shed, or know the sorrow I have known.”

THE END.

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